

THE HISTORY OF SPOHR'S VIOLIN CONCERTO NO.7 ON RECORD

by Robert Jordan

Louis Spohr completed his Violin Concerto No.7 in E Minor, Op.38, in Vienna, in July of 1814. It was premiered on February 19, 1815, at Spohr's farewell concert to Vienna. Clive Brown, in his Louis Spohr: a critical biography, states that, in the seventh concerto, Spohr "reached a peak which none of later concertos was to pass." The musical material is thematically and motivically highly integrated, creating a concerto which was no mere virtuoso showpiece. Viennese audiences seemed to appreciate this fact, but Spohr himself lamented that the intrinsic musical value of the work went largely unheeded in less sophisticated musical centres.

True, the technical demands on the the soloist are quite considerable, especially in the Finale, but it is the musical values of this concerto which the technical prowess of the soloist should serve. The seventh has not even come close to acquiring as much renown as the far more popular eighth concerto, the famous "Gesangszene", Op.47. Surely, however, the seventh is a work of at least equal, if not greater, rank than the eighth, despite the latter's innovative formal layout and greater popularity. In the recording history of these two works, this is a moot point, as the eighth has received more than a dozen recordings to the seventh's mere three.

The 1986 release, on Marco Polo Records (both CD and LP), of Spohr's Violin Concerto No.7 was the third of these recordings. Nevertheless, for all practical purposes to the collector, it may as well be the first.

It was in 1952 that the enterprising U.S. record company, Urania, released the world's first recording of the seventh concerto. It was played by Rudolf Schulz, accompanied by the Berlin Radio Orchestra conducted by Robert Heger with the ubiquitous eighth as a coupling. Reports have it that the performance, but not the sound (1950s mono), was satisfactory enough. Someone in the Urania administrative hierarchy obviously was quite sympathetic to the music of Spohr as the company released several of his works over the years of Urania's existence.

Unfortunately, repeated attempts to obtain even a taped copy of this particular recording have been to no avail, so I cannot give any personal comment upon it. It is a real Spohr collector's item: should any member happen upon it, buy it at once and let me know! I would dearly love to obtain at least a cassette tape copy of it.

In 1979, the Stadtparkasse, Kassel, released the first stereo recording of Spohr's Concerto No.7. It is a performance in which violinist Christiane Edinger (accompanied by the Frankfurt Radio Symphony Orchestra conducted by John Carewe) wrestles gamely with the music, but the concerto is just slightly out of her grasp technically. Granted, she attempts to inject the drama and passion inherent in the work into her playing, but alas that playing is simply not up to the standards that this far from easy concerto requires.

Although the record was apparently never released commercially, it used to be available, years ago, free for the asking from the Kassel

Stadtsparkasse. Now it seems it can be purchased from Bärenreiter in Kassel. In any case, it has never been listed in the Bielefelder Katalog, the German national record catalogue; it is a bit of a phantom as far as availability is concerned. And how long supplies will last is anybody's guess.

Elsewhere on this two-record set is Spohr's 'Der Berggeist' Overture (not otherwise available on record), so for the Spohrophile who must have everything by his favourite composer, a letter of inquiry to sources in Kassel is an absolute necessity. Also included in this set are the 'Jessonda' Overture, Beethoven's Symphony No.8 (performed passably well) Wolfgang Rihm's 'Erste Abgesangszene', a modernistic work based on Spohr's Violin Concerto No.8.

With Marco Polo's release of last year, we have state of the art sound (in the CD version), perfectly satisfactory orchestral accompaniment by the Philharmonic Chamber Orchestra, Bratislava, conducted by Libor Pesek and a violinist whose technical prowess is consummate with the demands of the work.

This sounds promising to be sure. Unfortunately, this violinist, Takako Nishizaki, does not conceive of the work as anything remotely dramatic. Her playing is smooth, admittedly sweet and lyrical with good intonation, but rather complacent, albeit not quite dull. The recording has the undeniable bonus of what is surely the world's first recording of Spohr's Violin Concerto No.12 as a coupling. It seems to be well enough played and, as this is the only available recording of the twelfth, well . . . need one say more? "It's this 'un or nothin', Bucko!"

A comparison of the timings of the movements of Edinger's and Nishizaki's versions is revealing: Edinger takes 10:28 for the first, 7:43 for the second and 7:06 for the third movement, while Nishizaki takes 11:22, 8:12 and 10:05 respectively. Edinger is consistently faster in all three movements, proportionately a lot faster in the third movement (where some fireworks are not amiss). The tempi at which she takes the movements of the concerto are only inappropriate in that she cannot quite handle the music technically at those speeds. Were her technical grasp of the music more secure, her tempi would be quite in accord with the nature of the music. Nishizaki handles the technical demands of the music well enough, but her tempi are somewhat sluggish at times -- outright lackadaisical in the Finale. If only Edinger had Nishizaki's technique, hers would definitely be the interpretation to choose.

However, we must await the definitive version of this most worthwhile concerto (Perlman or Accardo, where are you when we need you?). Until such definitive interpretation arrives, one must, I feel, side with the Marco Polo release, albeit with the misgivings mentioned. Ironically, with the high desirability of the couplings being a definite consideration most Spohr collectors are going to want to obtain both recordings anyway!